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ABSTRACT

This fastback document examines the strategic-planning process. Intended for school administrators, the booklet offers practical advice on strategic planning, and the importance of such planning in those districts that experience high turnover. When conceptualizing a strategic plan, administrators should begin with an end in mind and then develop a practical plan to achieve that end. It is also necessary to develop a plan in conjunction with other stakeholders so that everyone has a vested interest in the plan's success. However, any plan, no matter how carefully conceived, will have to overcome various obstacles, such as a lack of interest, a lack of time, and disillusionment. A plan facilitator can help educators surmount these limitations and can set guidelines throughout the entire planning process. The basic elements of the plan should include a mission statement, a vision statement, and an action plan. A strategic-plan committee can establish each of these fundamental components, but it is also important for there to be follow-up so that people can measure whether or not the strategic plan accomplished its goal. Since the strategic-planning process is extremely demanding, all those who are called to formulate such plans must be prepared to contribute time and effort. (Contains 20 references.) (RJM)

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Strategic Planning for School Administrators

Roger Prosise

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Series Editor, Donovan R. Walling

Strategic Planning for School Administrators

by
Roger Prosise

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Introduction

If placing the right people in the right jobs is the most important function and responsibility of a chief executive, then planning certainly comes in a close second.

At first I questioned this order. I considered communication to be more important than planning. Later I realized that unless a CEO has a plan and is able to plan effectively, there will be little of substance to communicate to his or her constituents. And many leaders argue that planning is the most important function of a chief executive.

However, whether planning takes first, second, or third place on a chief executive's agenda, everyone will agree that good planning is critical. In education, superintendents and principals often are required to develop strategic plans for their districts or schools. While such planning always is a cooperative activity, the superintendent or principal must provide leadership.

This fastback offers an analysis and description of the strategic planning process. Because it is based on my involvement with strategic planning as a superintendent and principal, it is written by a practitioner for practitioners.

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Why Plan?

School administrators are besieged by problems that require immediate attention. They are constantly confronted by troubled teachers, irate parents, frustrated students, leaking roofs, paperwork galore, and countless, seemingly endless meetings. Given these demands, one might ask, Is it realistic to think that a school administrator has time to plan? I suggest that the real question is, Can any administrator afford not to plan? Failure to plan unquestionably leads to ineffectiveness in any number of areas. Effective, strategic planning is imperative for the successful administrator.

Providing Clear Direction

A strategic plan provides direction. Planning is particularly important in schools, where reacting to crises is commonplace. All the planning in the world will not relieve administrators from having to "put out the fires," but good planning will allow administrators to focus on the important issues. It also will help administrators respond more efficiently to crises.

A strategic plan also can help administrators sort the new programs and innovations, often described in the

professional literature, that regularly come across their desks. Without a strategic plan, it is difficult for the administrator (or his or her subordinates) to determine which ideas merit time and attention. Without a plan, ideas may be taken up serendipitously; and the school or district may become involved with a succession of unproductive trends and fads. Such meandering is a problem for several reasons: 1) Unproductive trends and fads taken up by whim are difficult to institute on a serious basis, particularly in view of high turnover among administrators; 2) such trends and fads can pull staff and administration in different directions, thus creating turmoil and inconsistency; and 3) follow-through becomes impossible. Professional educators all benefit from a strategic plan because it lets everyone know the direction in which the school or district is headed.

Strategic planning also allows the community to participate in the future of their schools. Such planning involves community members in the process of identifying needs, establishing goals and timetables, identifying resources, developing action plans, and developing evaluation methods.

Changing Leadership

Many school districts suffer from a high turnover among school administrators. As a result, one administrator may pursue one set of goals and the next administrator could choose to pursue an entirely different set of goals. The lack of continuity will lead to frustration, and the absence of follow-through on goals and pro-

grams will lead to lower productivity within the school or district.

A strategic plan helps address the problem of administrative turnover. If turnover occurs, the new administrator can "inherit" a plan that is based on relevant data and has been developed by members of the school district and community. This plan can provide clear direction for the new administrator. However, the potential negative, of course, is that the new administrator will not be free to develop his or her own plan, though some redirection may be possible.

At the same time, a strategic plan also can provide direction for the board of education or superintendent when selecting a new administrator. When candidates for administrative positions are interviewed, their ability and willingness to follow the strategic plan can be a significant factor in deciding which candidate to hire.

Practical Considerations

Any strategic plan is a kind of wish list, but it is also much more than that. A wish list alone is inadequate because it fails to answer basic questions:

- What will the school district accomplish by getting the items on the wish list?
- Can the school district find sufficient resources to fund the "wishes"?
- Is the wish list consistent with the school district's mission and vision?

Members of the strategic planning committee and the school district at large will have ample opportunity to express the need for such things as new programs, new equipment, and better working conditions. Before developing a "wish list," the committee must identify needs, establish goals, develop action plans, and develop a vision. These phases require a large amount of thought and discussion.

Beginning with the End in Mind

As Stephen Covey states in his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, an effective way to begin is to

have an end in mind. I see this process as fairly exact and concrete. As an example in the area of student achievement, a strategic planning subcommittee might describe expected outcomes in math and reading on multiple forms of assessment. The same thinking applies to all other aspects of school. Attendance rate, the participation rate in extracurricular activities, and participation in staff development workshops are concrete examples of topics that a strategic planning committee can address while developing a plan.

Some may suggest that this approach is too specific and has too narrow a focus for a strategic plan. I recommend this approach as a way of ensuring that the strategic plan will be a practical and useful document for the school district. Along similar lines, I suggest that developing a mission statement might be better accomplished after, not before, strategic planning.

Like most educators, my hope is that students will become lifelong learners, will develop the ability to think critically, and will be prepared to lead meaningful lives in a democratic society. Such general intentions can be found in numerous mission statements, and I firmly believe that developing a mission statement is important. However, it may be more meaningful for strategic plan facilitators and superintendents to develop the mission statement at the end of the planning process. Just as the process of planning can begin with an end in sight, it may be more effective to set down the general intentions after the specifics have been carefully identified.

By going through the strategic planning process, members of the planning committee will have access to

an enormous amount of information related to the school or district. Therefore, it is at the end of the planning process that schools and districts develop a true understanding of who they are and what they are really about.

Developing a Practical Plan

Too often organizations devote enormous amounts of time, energy, and resources to developing a strategic plan that ultimately sits on a shelf and collects dust. As a result, those who helped develop the plan become discouraged and demoralized; and they may view future planning in a negative light.

It is essential for the school leader to commit to implementing the goals and strategies outlined in the strategic plan. Therefore accountability should be built into the process in order to guarantee that the plan will be used.

Part of the strategic planning process includes dreaming and brainstorming ideas for improvement. For example, a subcommittee focusing on curriculum may generate a myriad of innovative ideas for school improvement. But after developing the ideas, the members of that subcommittee must prioritize their ideas and identify the resources needed to implement the ideas. This is the practical aspect of planning.

For example, if the curriculum subcommittee recommends that a foreign language be taught beginning in first grade, then the subcommittee also must identify the resources needed to implement this recommenda-

tion. Simultaneously, the finance subcommittee should determine exactly what the school district can afford and make recommendations about how to generate revenue to fund additional programs.

Another step that can be taken to assure people that the plan will be practical and thus used by the school or district is to incorporate the administration of the strategic plan into the evaluation process. By this I mean that the development and administration of the strategic plan should be a part of the superintendent's or the principal's employment evaluation. Likewise, the superintendent should use the administration of the strategic plan in the evaluation of the various building administrators; principals should hold assistant principals and department chairs similarly accountable. These levels of accountability greatly enhance the probability of successful planning and subsequent implementation of the strategic plan.

Building a Stake in the Plan

Those who create a strategic plan have a stake in its successful implementation. A strategic plan provides practical direction to a school district. The goals outlined in the strategic plan help determine the uses of district resources. Critical issues, such as curriculum development, staffing needs, and financial forecasting, are addressed through the strategic plan; and important decisions have to be made on these topics.

Faculty and staff must have input in these decisions by participating in the development of the strategic

plan. A strategic planning process that includes members (or representatives) of the entire school or district community prevents a top-down approach to decision making. It also gives all constituents a clear avenue for input in the development of the organization's goals.

Most goals will directly or indirectly affect students and their parents. Therefore many strategic planning processes also tap input from these groups, even on matters not directly related to them. For example, staff development and staff working conditions are areas that do not directly concern students and parents, but how such matters are handled affects how staff do their jobs. That does affect students and parents.

Overcoming Obstacles

Three obstacles often present during strategic planning must be overcome. These obstacles are lack of interest, lack of time, and disillusionment.

Lack of Interest. I call this the "been there, done that" obstacle. Some staff already may have been through a strategic planning process and, even if it was successful, do not see a need to go through the process again. The facilitator of any strategic planning process must be able to demonstrate the need for such a process and to show that the process has practical value. Moreover, the facilitator must be able to assure participants that the resulting plan will be implemented, not merely shelved.

For district-level strategic planning, the superintendent and at least some members of the board of educa-

tion must be closely involved in the development of the strategic plan. The superintendent must acquire a working knowledge of the strategic plan and develop a system of accountability. For example, if the strategic plan indicates that a new foreign language program will be evaluated after year two, it is imperative that the superintendent follow up on the recommendation. Otherwise, the intent to implement the strategic plan becomes suspect.

In school districts with preexisting strategic plans, whether the plans are good or poor, it would behoove the facilitator to recognize and honor that prior work and to use it whenever possible. It also is advisable for the facilitator to point out, when applicable, how the new strategic planning process will differ in positive ways from the prior experience.

Lack of Time. Developing a competent strategic plan requires a considerable amount of time. The strategic planning committee often may meet during the evening or on weekends for several months. The committee members may have to work a full day and then devote two or three more hours to committee work. All of this requires a considerable sacrifice of personal time. Therefore it is essential for the strategic planning process to be seen as valuable, and participants in the process must feel assured that their participation is key to the success of the effort.

Disillusionment. Feelings of disillusionment about strategic planning often arise from prior negative experiences: processes that did not proceed smoothly or

created ill feelings, plans that were not implemented or were not properly supported after implementation. Other causes of disillusionment include lack of familiarity with the strategic planning goals and processes and lack of support and critical questions from the board of education.

Recognition of the sources of disillusionment should give the strategic planning facilitator cues for addressing such problems. Following are some general principles that can be articulated to help overcome disillusionment:

1. The strategic plan will be relevant to the needs of the school or district because the entire community will have input in the plan. The strategic planning committee will include representatives from all stakeholder groups: teachers, parents, staff, administration, community, and board of education.
2. The strategic plan will be practical because it will be developed by people who will be responsible for using it.
3. The strategic plan will be used because it will provide valuable direction for the school or district, and the development and implementation of the plan will be a part of the job evaluation of those charged with overseeing the process.
4. The strategic plan will be valuable because it will provide direction that is needed by the school or district. If no strategic plan is in place, it is probable that many people in the school community will recognize the need for such a plan.

Naming a Facilitator

There is no single correct answer to the question, Who should facilitate the strategic planning process? The most common options are hiring an outside consultant or making it the responsibility of a central office or building administrator. Another option, which is less common, is to have a community member facilitate the process. There are advantages and disadvantages to all of these options.

- *Consultant.* Advantages include expertise, experience, and objectivity. Disadvantages are potentially high cost and lack of any vested interest in or firsthand knowledge of the community.
- *Administrator.* Advantages include knowledge of the community, vested interest in the success of the process and the plan, and low cost of services. Disadvantages are a potential lack of objectivity and a lack of experience or expertise in strategic planning.
- *Community Member.* Advantages include knowledge of the community and probable low cost for services. Disadvantages may include lack of objectivity and limited understanding of education matters. Open questions are the community member's experience and expertise in strategic planning.

The decision regarding who should facilitate the strategic plan will vary according to school or district circumstances.

Establishing Responsibilities and Limits

The facilitator is responsible for setting guidelines for the strategic planning committee throughout the entire planning process. What will the committee be responsible for? What are the limits of those responsibilities? The guidelines will be used to guide discussions and decisions. As a result, meetings likely will be productive and participants will feel inclined to voice their ideas and opinions.

The facilitator should cooperate with school and district leaders when setting responsibilities and limits. The facilitator should discuss these at the outset of the planning process. Following are a few suggestions for stating responsibilities and limits:

- Decisions will be based on the best interest of students.
- Diverse opinions are sought and valued.
- Committee work will be regarded as an inclusive process.
- Decisions will be based on best-practice research.
- The strategic plan document will be practical.
- Discussion must be constructive and positive.
- Meetings will be limited to the stated times.
- The strategic plan must be approved by the board of education.

Stating even the seemingly self-evident will put all committee members on a solid footing for developing the strategic plan.

Elements of a Strategic Plan

I risk contradicting my previous remarks about the advantage of developing a mission statement after, rather than before, the strategic planning process. Thus I would point out that I am making a distinction between "mission" and "mission statement." The statement may not be the full encapsulation of the mission.

Mission

One of the first tasks of the strategic planning committee will be to examine the school's or district's mission. Does the mission match the actual work of the organization? If not, how can congruence be achieved?

The true mission of a school or district may not be well articulated by a mission statement that hangs in every corridor or appears on letterhead stationery. The true mission of a school or district is defined by the actions of individuals: the behaviors, practices, and habits of the people. A framed mission statement may eloquently describe the preparation of students to live in a global society, while, in fact, most of the instructional attention of the school is focused on preparing students for standardized tests.

Thus a foundation for strategic planning will be a thorough discussion of just what the school or district really is about. This discussion often can be bolstered by gathering information: examining existing documents, conducting focus-group discussions and interviewing key individuals, and using questionnaires and surveys.

If one accepts the premise that all schools and districts are, at least in some ways, unique, then what qualities must be articulated that speak to this uniqueness? By the way, I find this notion of uniqueness suspect; but the task of defining a school's or district's mission is vitally important even if one believes the opposite, that all schools are in most aspects much alike.

Answering the "What are we?" question establishes a foundation. The true mission of the school or district also can serve as a source of ideas that may be actualized through strategic planning.

Vision

Determining the answer to the "What are we?" question will lead to the next vital question: "Where are we going?" In strategic planning that question just as often takes a slightly different slant: "Where *should* we be going?"

At this point I believe it is useful to divide the strategic planning committee into subcommittees that also will address the next question. That question, of course, will be, "Now that we know where we should be going, how do we get there?"

Subcommittees often are best structured along traditional lines: curriculum, staff development, community relations, technology, transportation, special needs, and so on. Some subcommittees can be established from preliminary discussions; they can be "fine-tuned" later and new subcommittees formed as needs emerge.

Articulating a vision for a school or district necessarily begins with dreams, hopes, and wishes. Committee members should be encouraged to release their inhibitions and to envision an ideal school or district. Members of the subcommittee should have resources available to help them learn about innovative and effective programs that could be beneficial. Preparing to cast a vision involves reading education materials, attending conferences, visiting other schools, viewing videotapes, and meeting with community agencies. Subcommittees may be given responsibility for researching focus areas and developing various aspects of the vision.

Having examined the ideal, the committee then must temper it with practical considerations. "Where should we be going?" must be tempered by "Where are we able to go?"

An important consideration is the responsibility for chairing subcommittees. This job should not fall to one group (or class) of individuals. For example, not all subcommittee chairs should be administrators. Otherwise, the process will appear — and, in fact, may become — top-down. Assigning chairing duties on a representative basis can avoid this potential problem.

Another consideration is the extent of the vision. How far out should the vision extend? I suggest that

five years is reasonable. With this in mind, the vision question can be rephrased, "Where should we be five years from now?" Setting a finite goal better limits the vision to the practical, the doable.

This question then becomes the impetus for subcommittee work. Where should our school (or district) be five years from now in terms of technology? in terms of curriculum? and so on. Again, an examination of documents, interviews, questionnaires, and other means may be helpful to gather information from which the subcommittee can work. Following are some typical questions that can serve as starting points for gathering information:

- Are you satisfied with the curriculum at this school? Please comment on positives and/or negatives.
- If you could add a new program at this school, what would it be?
- Should this school devote more time to educating students about sex? (or drug abuse? or bicycle safety? etc.)
- How well-informed are you about your child's education experience? What kinds of communication do you want to receive?

Questions such as these can be used in one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires.

Action Plan

No strategic plan can be useful unless it is used. The school or district must put the plan into action. And that

means developing an action plan to show the way.

The action plan must link information gathering and discussion with practice. Therefore the successful action plan will address several important matters:

1. What is the overall goal?
2. What specific objectives compose this goal?
3. To achieve each objective:
   - What strategies must be used?
   - What resources must be available?
   - What is the timeline for meeting the objective?
   - Who must be responsible for meeting the objective?
   - How will we know when the objective has been met?

These questions can be incorporated into a one-page template for each objective and then grouped by overall goal, with everything being gathered together for the final, written plan. The effective action plan is written in language that is clear, specific, and direct. Each answer to one of these questions provides another tool for implementing the action plan.

At the action plan stage, the core subcommittees may need to be expanded for several reasons: 1) in order to involve individuals with specialized skills or knowledge, 2) to relieve the workload of current subcommittee members, and 3) to share ownership in the strategic plan with a larger audience of participants. Many times individuals who initially volunteered to work on the action plan but were not able to be included can now be drawn in as the workload expands. I will say more about

committee and subcommittee composition in the next section.

Committee Composition

Who is involved in the strategic planning process is as important as what they do. The successful strategic plan is the result of an inclusive, collegial, cooperative endeavor in which all members of the school community feel that they are stakeholders. The value of structuring a thoroughly representative planning committee cannot be overemphasized.

A first step is inviting individuals to participate. Both written and verbal invitations may be issued to teachers, parents, staff, administrators, community members, and members of the board of education. Key people in the school district should be encouraged to participate in the process.

The invitation does not need to be elaborate. Following is a sample text:

Dear ___:

The ___ district is beginning to develop a strategic plan. The strategic planning process will be inclusive. All members of the school district and community are invited to participate in the process. A sound strategic plan requires input from

teachers, parents, community members, board members, administrators, staff, and students.

As superintendent of the school district, I am inviting you to serve on the strategic planning committee. The strategic planning process will begin next month and it will address three basic questions.

Where are we as a district?
Where do we want to be in five years?
How are we going to get there?

The strategic planning process will include a steering committee and five subcommittees. Each subcommittee will focus on one of the following topics:

- student achievement, curriculum, and programs
- technology
- buildings, grounds, and transportation
- finance
- community relations

No one wants a plan that simply sits on a shelf and collects dust. Just like everyone else, I want a plan that is practical and will lead us forward. If you are interested in serving on the strategic planning committee, please complete the enclosed interest form and return it to my office.

Sincerely,

An interest form should be enclosed that asks interested respondents to provide their name, address, and phone number and to indicate the subcommittee that interests them.

After a number of respondents have agreed to serve on the strategic planning committee, the primary lead-

ers (superintendent, principals, consultants, etc.) of the strategic plan effort must meet to select people to serve on the committee. The committee should include grade-level teachers and parent representatives and department representatives. It should be balanced in terms of sex and race. The committee members should be available for meetings, dependable, and able to communicate clearly, work with others, and listen actively. Parents should come from various parts of the community, and nonparent community members should be respected leaders.

Initial Information

Basic, comprehensive information about the school or district should be distributed and discussed with members of the strategic planning committee during the initial committee meeting. This packet will provide committee members with useful information for making decisions. The information should be in a form that can be easily understood by the general public. Whenever possible, trend data — enrollment, tests, etc. — should be included in the packet. Trend data can provide committee members with a more detailed picture of the school or district. Following are some topics that might be covered in such an initial information packet.

- enrollment trends
- demographic data
- standardized test data
- attendance, truancy, and dropout data
- financial reports

- previous long-range plans
- results of previous district needs assessments

Committee Structures

The strategic planning effort can be distributed across three types of committees: a general committee, several subcommittees, and a steering committee. The general strategic planning committee consists of all the members of the school district and community who were selected to serve in the strategic planning endeavor. This general committee will be divided into subcommittees for specific purposes or to address particular topics, which I suggested previously. The subcommittees target specific components of the school district. The strategic planning facilitator (superintendent, principal, consultant, etc.) and the various subcommittee chairs form the steering committee, which is a smaller group that can coordinate the work of the larger general committee and the subcommittees.

Each subcommittee should be charged, within its topic area, to accomplish several activities:

- Select a chair and a secretary;
- Review pertinent documents related to the topic under investigation;
- Conduct research (interviews, questionnaires) as needed to obtain information;
- Respond to the strategic planning questions — What are we? (mission), Where should we be in five years? (vision), and How do we get there? (action plan); and

- Develop a means of evaluating the implementation of the strategic plan.

The last of these activities is the subject of the next section.

Evaluation

Did the strategic planning committee accomplish what it was supposed to accomplish? Did the strategic plan accomplish what it was supposed to accomplish? These are two extremely important questions. An effective evaluation plan will help answer them.

Did the Planning Committee Accomplish Its Goals?

The facilitator should give the committee an opportunity to reflect on its work over the several months of planning. After all, a great deal of time and effort has been devoted to developing a strategic plan. The committee members should have the opportunity to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the strategic planning process and the final product.

Several ways to evaluate the process and plan come to mind:

1. Conduct a focus group that consists of representatives from each subcommittee to discuss key questions, such as:

- Were the goals of the committee (or subcommittee) clearly defined?
- Did you have sufficient information and support needed to accomplish the goals?
- Did all members of the committee have equal opportunity to participate in the process?
- Did you have sufficient time to accomplish the goals?
- Were meeting times and locations as convenient as possible?
- Did the committee follow the responsibilities and limits that were reviewed in the beginning of the process?

2. Each committee member might be asked to complete a questionnaire regarding the strategic planning process. The questions above also can be used for this purpose.

3. The facilitator might interview key leaders involved in the strategic planning process, such as members of the steering committee.

Did the Strategic Plan Accomplish Its Goals?

The question of whether the strategic plan has accomplished its goals is a question that is answered each day in the classrooms or schools. Since the strategic plan is intended to be a practical document, the extent to which the action plans are implemented is the extent to which the strategic plan has accomplished its goals.

It would be easy to suggest additional surveys, questionnaires, and interviews; but those tools tend to be artificial in assessing the effectiveness of a highly practical strategic plan that has been built to achieve observable results. Either the effects are obvious or frustration will be evident in their absence. If formal measures are needed, they may be helpful as the starting point for a successor plan.

At the same time I would suggest that the strategic plan overseers review the plan annually to observe progress in implementation and to make adjustments as needed. This annual review might take the form of a workshop or retreat, as it will take a day or two; a thorough annual review cannot be accomplished in a few hours. Again, such a review is not intended to alter the plan substantially. Rather, the annual review should provide information about how well the plan is being implemented and what steps might be taken to fine-tune the implementation process. Factors change over time, and the five-year "life" of a strategic plan may necessitate minor adjustments to ensure success.

Conclusion

Effective leaders recognize the importance of strategic planning and regularly engage in planning for school improvement. Planning establishes priorities and identifies strategies and resources for accomplishing goals. A strategic plan can be an excellent instrument to affect change and to bring about genuine school improvement.

The strategic planning process should be an inclusive endeavor. The entire school or district and its supporting community should be represented on the strategic planning committee. Everyone in the school district, through carefully structured representation, should have a voice in the development of the plan. Such an inclusive planning process will enhance the quality of the product and increase the sense of ownership of the plan.

The strategic planning process is extremely demanding. It requires a great deal of time and effort on the part of many people. Meetings often follow full days of work or are held on weekends. It is important for the organizers and the members of the strategic planning committee to recognize the time commitment involved in developing a strategic plan — and to be willing to make that commitment.

The strategic plan itself devolves to a document that provides clear direction for the future. It defines goals, establishes priorities, and identifies the strategies and resources needed to accomplish the goals. The goals must have a clear and positive effect on the school or district. There also must be a direct link between the strategic plan and student achievement.

The strategic plan also is a practical document, one that should be *used*. It provides school leaders with annual goals. It should be used when developing annual budgets.

Finally, the strategic plan should be reviewed annually. As necessary, the plan should be revised to meet changing needs and conditions.

A strategic plan can be highly beneficial to a school or district. In order for the strategic planning process and the resulting plan to be successful, it is imperative that school leaders and concerned participants devote the necessary time and resources to develop a plan that is relevant to the needs of the school or district and will carry it into the future.

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